

THE CHRIST-IDEAL AND THE GOLDEN AGE.

BY THE EDITOR.

[In an editorial article in the April number on "Some Problems of Modern Theology," reference was made to a poem by Virgil greeting "the birth of a saviour-child in the language of a prophet, which greatly resembles the sentiment with which the nativity of Christ might have been hailed by the Christians." At the time we thought the poem sufficiently known simply to mention the fact, but since this seems not to be the case we will here discuss the subject more fully and publish a translation of it in its original meter.]

VIRGIL'S Fourth Eclogue has been considered by many Christians as a prophecy of the advent of Christ, and certainly it might as well be so understood as many of the passages in the Old Testament which are quoted in Matthew. It is true that the child to whom this poem was addressed, whosoever he may have been, did not fulfil the expectations in the sense in which they were meant, but the same is also true of the Old Testament prophecies. In the sense in which they were meant they have never been fulfilled. The Christian interpretation has been superimposed and does violence to the meaning of the passages quoted. This method of interpretation was deemed legitimate in those days and we too follow the same method to-day when we see the past in the light of the present that has developed from it, speaking of leaders of progress as having "built better than they knew."

Virgil's Eclogue is remarkable in showing how widespread was the idea of a saviour who should come to bring peace on earth and restore the golden age. Oracles to that purpose were afloat, and Virgil himself refers to verses of the Cumaean Sybil whose dicta were considered as a divine revelation even among Christians.¹ The

¹ From Conington's edition of Virgil we quote the following note:

"The original Sibylline books having been destroyed in the burning of the Capitol in Sulla's time, the senate ordered a collection of Sibylline verses to be made in the various towns of Italy and Greece. After a critical examination about a thousand lines were retained as genuine, and preserved with the same formality as the lost volumes. Varro however tells us (Dionys.

civil wars, with their disturbance of commerce and much unnecessary bloodshed had caused great unrest. The world was longing for the strong hand of a just ruler with whom the Golden Age of Saturn would return. The Astraea, the celestial virgin who had been living among men on earth in the times of primitive innocence, but had withdrawn to the heavens where she became visible as the constellation of Virgo, will descend to earth, and with her a general era of goodwill and patriarchal virtue will be restored.

Our poem can be definitely dated; it is dedicated to Pollio and expressly refers to the year of his consulate in the words *te consule*.

Pollio was one of the great influential men at the time of the civil wars and had been Virgil's patron and friend. At the time of his consulate in 40 B. C. the political situation was greatly improved, for it seemed that at last peace would be established. We may infer from the poem itself that a child either was expected or had actually just been born in the family of Pollio during the same year, but it is impossible to make any further definite statement. Prof. John Conington in his English edition of Virgil's works thus sums up the historical question so far as its details can be ascertained (p. 505):

"The date is fixed to the year 714, when Pollio was consul and assisted in negotiating the peace of Brundisium. The hero of the poem is a child born, or to be born, in this auspicious year, who is gradually to perfect the restoration then beginning. It is difficult to say who the child was, for the simple reason that Virgil's anticipations were never fulfilled. It is not certain that the child was ever born: it is certain that, if born, he did not become the regenerator of his time. On the other hand, there is considerable scope for conjecturing who he may have been. Pollio himself had two sons born about this period: the treaty was solemnized by the marriage of Antonius with Octavia, and the union of Octavianus with Scribonia had taken place not long before. The most ancient commentators, if we may judge by the notes in Macrobius (S. 3. 7. 1.) Servius, and the Berne scholia, were not agreed whether the poem was to be referred to Octavianus, or to one or other of Pollio's sons. One of these, called Saloninus, from his father's capture of Salona in Dalmatia, died in his infancy, while the other, C. Asinius Gallus, who is said to have spoken of himself to Asconius Pedianus as the person meant, lived to be discussed by Augustus as his possible successor (Tac. A. 1. 13), and finally fell a victim to the jealousy of Tiberius (*ib.* 6. 23). Octavianus's marriage issued in the birth of Julia: Octavia's child, if it was ever born, was the child not of Antonius, but of Marcellus, her former husband,

Halic. Antiq. R. 4. 62) that some spurious ones were introduced, which might be detected by their acrostich character; and this test was employed by Cicero (De Div. 2. 54) to disprove a professedly Sibylline prediction brought forward by those who wished to make Cæsar king. Later we find that forgeries of the kind had become common, private persons pretending to have oracles in their possession, and the matter was accordingly twice publicly investigated under Augustus (Suet. Aug. 31), and under Tiberius (Tac. A. 6. 12). Of the precise oracle to which Virgil refers nothing seems to be known."

by whom she was pregnant at the time of her second marriage. Any of these births, so far as we can see, may have appeared at the time to a courtly or enthusiastic poet a sufficient center round which to group the hopes already assumed to be rising in men's minds, and though the next three years may have made a difference in this respect, the poem would still continue to be in its general features the embodiment of a feeling not yet extinguished, and as such might well be published along with the other Eclogues. The peace of Brundisium itself was not so much the cause of this enthusiasm as the occasion of its manifestation—the partial satisfaction of a yearning which had long been felt, not merely the transient awakening of desires hitherto dormant. How far such hopes may have been connected with the expectation of a Messiah opens a wide question. The coincidence between Virgil's language and that of the Old Testament prophets is sufficiently striking: but it may be doubted whether Virgil uses any image to which a classical parallel cannot be found."

The reader will observe that at the end of the poem Virgil expresses his desire to live to sing the glory of his hero, and it is interesting to notice this parallelism with the Simeon story of the Gospel. It is an instance of an independent origin of a similar expression of sentiment under similar conditions. The Buddha child is thus greeted by a *rishi*, a Brahman prophet, Christ by Simeon, and this Roman babe by Virgil.

We have quoted for the information of the reader all that can be known about the child whom Virgil addresses in his poem, although nothing can be more indifferent to us at the present time, because the prophecy has not been fulfilled as it was meant. The main interest of this Eclogue consists not in the political situation of Rome in the year 714 (40 B. C.) but in the expectation of a saviour among the people of the Roman Empire. To be sure the ideal of Virgil is not a suffering Jesus who dies on the cross for the sins of mankind, but a valiant god-incarnation after the prototype of such heroes as Heracles, Jason, Perseus, etc., and it is true, as Professor Conington says, that Virgil "uses no image to which a classical parallel cannot be found."

How general these ideas of a saviour of mankind were in the days of Augustus may also be seen from the writings of Seneca who has actually been claimed for a Christian, and a plausible case has been made out to assume that he must have been a personal friend of St. Paul.

Tertullian speaks of Seneca as "often our own" (*sæpe noster*) while Lactantius looks upon him as a pagan who might have become a Christian. "If some one had instructed him," Lactantius said, "he would surely have held Zeno and his teacher Sotion in contempt." St. Augustine and St. Jerome mention letters of Seneca addressed

to St. Paul, and Jerome does not hesitate to count Seneca among the saints. A legend of the end of the fourth century that is ascribed to a certain Linus, and describes the "Passion of Peter and Paul," narrates details of a secret intercourse between Paul and Seneca. Although the latter is not mentioned by name, his personality is plainly indicated by being called the tutor of the emperor (*institutor imperatoris* and *quidam magister Cæsaris*). The letters of Seneca to St. Paul which were known to Jerome and Augustine seem to be hopelessly lost, but the subject was too tempting for writers of pious fiction not to take it up again, and in the beginning of the Middle Ages, presumably in the time of the Merovingians, another attempt was made to offer to the Christian world a correspondence between St. Paul and Seneca, but the crudeness of the style at once betrays the forgery. It consists of fourteen letters which have been incorporated by Hase as an Appendix to his edition of Seneca, and were edited by Kraus and Westerbürg in a separate and critical text edition.

Seneca continued to be regarded as a Christian during the Middle Ages; the Synod of Tours, for instance, cites him like a Church Father as a Christian authority. Not until the days of the Reformation was Seneca reclaimed for paganism by Erasmus and the humanists. Even to-day the idea is still upheld that Seneca was secretly a Christian, and the statement has been made that evidences were not forthcoming only because the philosopher did not dare to speak out boldly.² Xaver Kraus, however, calls attention to the fact that if Seneca had been a Christian he would at least in his last moments before his death have given some expression of his faith.

If Seneca had been a Christian he would not have used pagan terminology, he would not have spoken of Jupiter when he meant God, nor of Hercules when he meant the Saviour. He says of Hercules, for instance, (De Benef. I, 14):

"Hercules never gained victories for himself. He wandered through the circle of the earth, not as a conqueror, but as a protector. What, indeed, should the enemy of the wicked, the defensor of the good, the peacebringer, conquer for himself on land or sea!"

Such ideas of a god-man were common among pagans, as may be seen from Epictetus who insists on the divine sonship of Hercules saying (III, 24):

² So e. g., Johannes Kreyher in his *L. Annaeus Seneca und seine Beziehung zum Urchristentum*. Cf. also *Lucius Annæus Seneca und das Christentum* by Michael Baumgarten.

"He knew that no man is an orphan, but that there is a father always and constantly for all of them. He had not only heard the words that Zeus was the father of men, but he regarded him as his own father and called him such; and looking up to him he did what Zeus did. Therefore he could live happily everywhere."

With the same reasons and the same arguments that would make Seneca a Christian we can claim not only Epictetus but also Marcus Aurelius and even Plato and other pre-Christian philosophers. The fact is that the underlying philosophy of Christianity, or rather of the new religion that was to appear, gradually assumed a more and more definite shape.

Seneca was no more a Christian than Virgil, but this much is true that both were imbued with the spirit of the age in which a universal religion such as Christianity was preparing itself.

The very existence of Virgil's *Eclogue* which antedates the Christian era proves the existence of the saviour ideal, and historians recognize more and more that this ideal has made Christianity and has also influenced the spirit in which the story of Jesus was written in the Gospels.

We have prepared a translation in the meter of the original so as to give approximately the same impression that the Latin verses must have made on the Roman reader in Virgil's time.

O ye Sicilian Muses,³ let higher your strains be and grander.
Tamarisks do not please all, nor a song of the vineyards, the lowly.
Take we our theme from the woods, let the woods of the consul be worthy.

Now comes the era described in the verse of the Sybil of Cumae,
And from the beginning is started again the great order of ages,
Now does the virgin return, the Saturnian Kingdom appeareth;
Now from the heavens on high is descending a new generation

Bless him the infant with whom discontinues the era of iron;
Bless him with whom will arise the new race that is gloriously golden,
Bless, chaste Lucina,⁴ the boy; now reigneth thy brother Apollo.

Now is beginning this wonderful age while thou rulest as consul.
Pollio under thy sway, in thy year, the great months are proceeding.
Thou art the leader, and traces of crime that are not yet abolished
Will be forever removed, and the earth will be freed from its terror.
But that boy will partake of the life of the gods, he will meet them,
Meet all the heroes; and he will in turn by the gods be beholden.
Over a pacified world will he rule patriarchic in virtue.

³ Idyllic poetry was treated for the first time by Theocritus, the Sicilian, and the scenes described by him are placed in his home. Hence the divinities that inspire the *Eclogues* are addressed as Sicilian Muses.

⁴ Artemis, or Diana.

First will the earth without culture, dear boy, bring thee gifts for thy childhood,
 Vines of green ivy, and ladygloves lovely with wonderful fragrance;
 Mixed with the cheerful acanthus will grow Colocasian* lilies.
 Goats will return by themselves to our homesteads with udders distended,
 Nor any longer our cattle shall fear huge terrible lions,
 Yea, at the cradle for thee there shall blossom the sweetest of flowers.
 Then will the serpent die out, and the herbs disappear that bear poison,
 While the Assyrian spikenard will thrive in most bountiful plenty.
 But when the age thou attainest to read of the deeds of thy fathers,
 And of the heroes, and when thou beginnest to know what is virtue,
 Then will the ripening ears of the fields by and by turn to yellow.
 Then will be found the luxurious grape upon briers and brambles,
 And the hard oaks will be dripping with honey, like dew in the morning.

Yet some traces remain of the ancient insidious vices
 Which will induce bold sailors the ocean to dare. It will prompt us
 Walls round the cities to build and to cleave our acres with furrows.
 Then will another ship Argo, well steered by a helmsman like Tiphys,
 Carry new heroes to Colchis and other great wars are expected.
 Then against Troy will be sent for a second time mighty Achilles.
 Afterwards when thine age has endowed thee with vigorous manhood,
 Sailors no longer will sail on the sea, for no ships will be needed
 For an exchange of our goods. For all produce will grow in each country.
 Neither the soil will be tilled with the hoe, nor the grape vine need pruning;
 Even the bullocks will stray from the plow set free by the farmer.
 Wool will no longer be died to exhibit the various colors,
 For in the meadows the ram will himself grow a fleece that is sometimes
 Reddish like purple and sometimes will turn into yellow like saffron.
 Lambs when they feed, of themselves will be dizen'd in hues that are
 scarlet.
 "Thus," said the Parcae in concert addressing their spindles, according
 To the eternal decree of the fates: "Run on, oh ye ages!"

Deign to accept,—for the time is fulfilled,—the illustrious honors,
 Thou, O loved offspring of gods, O son of great Jove, the Almighty.
 See how the world toward thee with its ponderous mass is inclining,
 See all the countries, the tracts of the sea, and the depth of the heaven,
 See how they hail the arrival, they all, of the age that is coming.

Oh that my life for the future would last but sufficiently longer,
 Also my spirit, that I thy glory might praise in my verses;
 Neither should Orpheus the Thracian, nor Linus excel me in singing,
 E'en though the former were helped by his mother, the last by his father,
 Son of Calliope, Orpheus, and Linus, the son of Apollo.

* Concerning this flower W. Robertson Smith says: "By the sacred river Belus grew the colocasium plants by which Heracles was healed after his conflict with the Hydra, and the roots continued to be used as a cure for bad sores." See Claudius Iolaus, *ap.* Steph. Byz. *s. v.* "Ακη.

Even if Pan would contest and Arcadians acted as umpires!
 Even God Pan (may Arcadians judge!) will confess to be beaten.

Show, little boy, by thy smile that already thou knowest thy mother
 Who for thy sake hath endured ten months⁵ of solicitous trouble.
 Smile, little infant! on Thee have not yet been smiling thy parents,
 Nor hast thou dined with the gods, nor been wedded as yet to a goddess.

Seneca embodies the matured philosophical spirit of his age which appears so Christian to Christians, and Virgil exhibits a Messianic hope which, though couched in pagan terms, is quite Christian in sentiment. Nor are these authors exceptions, for we find the same ideas at that time prevailing everywhere in the Roman Empire. As further evidence we will quote passages from some public documents which date back to the time of Augustus celebrating him as the source of universal welfare,⁶ the Saviour of mankind, as a god with whose birthday a new era commences, which brings us the Gospel (the *evangelion*), consisting in peace on earth and a universal goodwill among men. The very words are either the same as those used in the Christian Gospels or quite similar, or even stronger.

The documents to which we refer are inscriptions (recently discovered in several cities of Asia Minor) of which those of Priene, Halicarnassus, Apameia and Eumencia are best preserved and have received most attention. They proclaim the introduction of the Julian calendar reform, which among other things ordains that the birthday of Augustus (Sept. 23) shall be celebrated as the New Year's festival.⁷

We quote the following remarkable passage from the inscription of Priene:

"Since Providence⁸ which ordains all things in our life, has restored enterprise and love of honor, it has accomplished for [our] life the most per-

⁵ It is interesting to notice that the time of gestation is explicitly stated to be ten months, which should be compared with the birth story of the Buddha which in Mr. Henry Clarke Warren's translation (p. 45) reads thus: "Now other women sometimes fall short of and sometimes run over the term of ten lunar months, . . . but not so the mother of a future Buddha. She carries the future Buddha in her womb for just ten months."

The coincidence of this parallelism is purely accidental, but remarkably interesting.

⁶ τὸ κοινὸν πάντων εὐτύχημα. The last word belongs to that group of auspicious designations beginning with the particle εὖ, meaning "well," but it has no parallel in our gospel language. It might briefly be translated "bliss."

⁷ For details see the essay by Mommsen and Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, entitled "Die Einführung des asianischen Kalenders," published in *Mith. des Kaiserl. deutschen arch. Instituts, Athen*, Abh. 1899, Vol. XXIV, p. 275 ff.

⁸ πρόνοια.

fect thing by producing the August One,⁹ whom it has filled with virtue for the welfare¹⁰ of the people; having sent him to us and ours as a Saviour.¹¹ who should stop war and ordain all things. Having appeared, however, the Cæsar¹² has fulfilled the hope of prophecies, since he has not only outdone the benefactors who had come before him, but also has not left to future ones the hope of doing better; the birthday of this God has become through him a beginning of the good tidings".¹³

The inscription of Halicarnassus contains the same ideas expressed in other words. We quote from it the following sentences:

"Since the eternal and immortal nature of the All has in grace¹⁴ given to men the greatest good in addition to excellent bounties, having brought forth Cæsar, the August One, for our happiness,—a father of his own country, the divine Roma, and a fatherly Zeus and Saviour of the whole race of men, for which Providence has not only fulfilled but even outdone the prayers of all. For pacified is the earth and the sea; the cities flourish, there is love of order, concord, good fellowship, prosperity and abundance of everything good. With useful hopes for the future, and good feeling toward the present, mankind is filled."

The good tidings that the golden age had returned under the government of a divine man who ruled the world from its capital, Rome, spread beyond the confines of the Roman Empire and reached Parthia where, as we know, Ahura Mazda, the Lord Omniscient, was worshiped. The Parthians were Mithraists; they believed that God would send a divine mediator called Mithras who would be born from a pure virgin and establish the kingdom of righteousness on earth. He would sit in judgment to separate the good and the bad. The dead would rise from their graves with spiritual bodies that would throw no shadow, and the living would be transfigured. Then peace would reign forever and all misery would be abolished. Now we learn from Pliny the Elder (23-79 A. D.) of a visit which Tiridates, King of Parthia paid to Nero. Having heard that the prosperity of the Roman Empire was due to the appearance of a divine incarnation, an august personality, who reigned under the

⁹ τὸν Σεβαστόν, venerable, majestic, worshipful. A translation of the Latin "Augustus," which is originally a title, not a name.

¹⁰ εὐεργεσία, i. e., well-doing, or well working, rendered in the dictionary "good service, a good deed, kindness, bounty, benefit." This word is similar to the Gospel term εὐδοξία, translated "good will" in our Bible. But the former is stronger than the latter; the latter denotes "well-meaning" while the former means "well-doing."

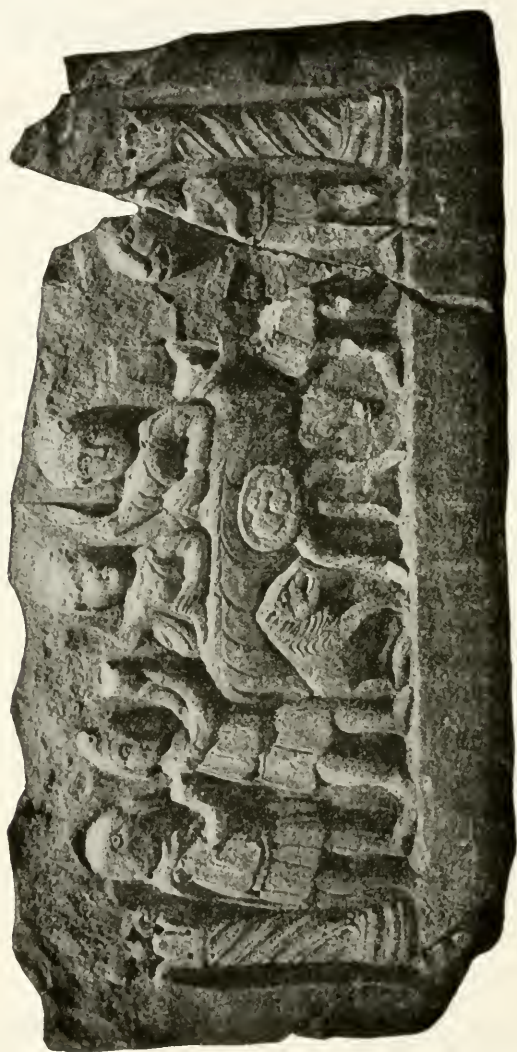
¹¹ Σωτήρ, the same word that is applied to Jesus as a synonym of Christ.

¹² ὁ Καῖσαρ. The name of Cæsar has here become a title.

¹³ In Greek εὐαγγέλιον, the same term which is used in the New Testament, meaning "gospel."

¹⁴ ἐχαρίσατο, derived from χάρις, which means "grace."

name and title of Cæsar, he left his home and proceeded to Italy for the sake of worshipping this great god-man and surrendering to him the kingdom of Parthia.



THE MITHRAIC SACRAMENT.

The report preserved by Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* XXX, 16) reads as follows:

"Tiridates the magus had come to him [the emperor]....He had taken with him Magi and had him initiated into the magic meal [viz., the Mithraistic Lord's Supper]. Yet while he gave back to him his kingdom, he [the emperor] could not receive from him his art."

We know through Justin Martyr that the Mithraists celebrated a sacrament, which to all appearance was the same as the Lord's Supper of the Christians, and on one of the Mithraic monuments we see an altar on which are placed the eucharist cups and the holy wafers bearing a cross. Justin refers to the Mithraic sacrament as well known to his readers and expressly speaks of the ceremony as "the same" as that of the Christians, only he claims that evil spirits had here as in so many other instances imitated the divine institutions of Christianity. We learn from the Avesta that the sacred cakes and the hallowed cup were taken for the sake of nourishing the resurrection body, and we must assume that Tiridates, wishing the Roman Emperor to take part in the blessings of his religion, celebrated the sacrament with him. He did not know Nero, and the Romans seemed to think that the Mithraic sacrament conveyed some magic power on those who partook of it. We can imagine that both parties were mistaken in each other. How little did Tiridates know Nero, and Pliny informs us that the ceremony of the magic meal brought no special benefit to the Emperor.

Dio Cassius mentions the same incident in Nero's life, but he expressly states that Tiridates came because he recognized Mithras in the Roman Emperor. When he appeared before the Emperor, Dio Cassius reports that he addressed him with the words: "I came to thee, as to my God, in order to worship thee as the Mithras."¹⁵

There is no cogent reason to assume that the story of the magi as told in the Gospel according to Luke, was invented in imitation of the visit of Tiridates to Nero, although the similarity of the two reports is remarkable; and it is, to say the least, a very strange coincidence that Tiridates returned home by another way than the one by which he came,¹⁶ just as the magi did after they had worshipped the Christ child.

If we but bear in mind that the followers of Zoroaster expected a saviour (*saoshyant*) we can easily understand that the Christian Gospel writer was anxious to point out that their expectation was fulfilled in Jesus and that this fact had been recognized by the magi who had seen his star at the time of his birth. The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy even states that Zoroaster had foretold the birth of Christ,¹⁷ and Prof. Lawrence H. Mills has recently translated a "Hymn of Zarathushtra" which is the Prophet's "Greeting to an expected champion."

¹⁵ ἤλθον τε πρὸς σέ τὸν ἐμὸν θεόν, προσκυνήσων σε, ὡς καὶ τὸν Μίθραν. XLIII, 5.

¹⁶ οὐχ ἥπερ ἦλθε.

¹⁷ Chapter vii: "As Zerdusht had predicted."

And what do all these facts prove? Virgil's hymn hailing the return of the golden age, Seneca's pagan philosophy permeated with Christian sentiments, and in the beginning of the Christian era, the general expectation of a Saviour who would establish peace and goodwill;—all these things prove that a new religion was preparing itself in whose center would stand the figure of the God-man, the Saviour, the Lord, who is the vicegerent of God on earth. The Christ idea is older than the story of Jesus, and the latter was edited and re-edited until it incorporated all the features of the former and so met the requirements of the age. In St. Paul's day there was still a teacher who "was instructed in the way of the Lord," i. e., the Saviour, or the Christ, or rather the Christ-ideal. We read of Apollos* that "being fervent in the spirit he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John"—which means that he knew nothing of Jesus. This man was an Alexandrian Jew who was converted by Aquila and Priscilla to the Christianity of Paul which taught that Jesus was the Christ.

We have quoted the passage before,¹⁸ but we call attention to it again in connection with the facts which prove that the Saviour idea, the term "Christ," and even definite doctrines concerning Christ are pre-Christian; they existed before Jesus was born. We must assume that Paul too had taught a definite doctrine about the Christ before his conversion; and his views may have been very much like those of Apollos. Paul's conversion consisted simply in the idea which came upon him like a flash of lightning, that all his conceptions of Christ could be applied to Jesus, that the majesty of his divine nature was well set forth in his deepest humiliation, his death on the cross, "wherefore God hath highly exalted him and given him a name which is above every name."¹⁹

Christianity is a great historic movement which was bound to come in one way or another. Jesus is not the founder of Christianity but he has been adopted by Christians as their Christ. Christianity, or a religion such as Christianity, would have originated even if Jesus had never existed, and also if this growing faith of a god-man that would be worshiped as the Saviour of mankind had been linked to some other personality than Jesus; to the mythical person of Mithras; to some Brahman Avatar like Krishna; to the sage of India, Buddha; or Apollonius of Tyana, the repre-

* Acts xviii. 25.

¹⁸ See *Open Court* for February, 1908, "Christ and Christians," p. 113.

¹⁹ Philipians ii. 5-11.

sentative of an idealized paganism. It would have made a difference in many details if another than Jesus had been chosen as the Christ. In place of a retrospect upon Judaism with its Hebrew literature as the mother of Christianity we would look upon some other sacred canon; but in all essentials, in doctrine as well as in moral ideals, we would have had the same religion. Probably, too, we would have passed through the same aberrations: a dualistic interpretation of the soul, belief in supernaturalism and miracles, the establishment of a priestly hierarchy with its seat in Rome, the Medieval struggle between the secular and the ecclesiastical powers, and even the horrors of the Inquisition and witch persecution. But the final result would have been the same. Science would at last have dispersed the fog of superstition and any other kind of Christianity would also have liberated itself from the shackles of dogmatism. All accidentals are transient, but the ideal so far as it is founded on truth is eternal.